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CHAPTER 9

The Genius of Rural Life (1947-48)

In the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels refer to "the idiocy of rural life". For me, at least (Isabel had lived in Chinese villages before) our eight months in the village of Ten Mile Inn were a time of enlightenment rather than of stultification.

Isabel and I have written three books about Ten Mile Inn and nearby villages¹. The preface, prologue and epilogue of the first volume read in part.

In the middle of the civil war between the Chinese Communists and the Guomindang, the writers floated on a barge down the Grand Canal, through no-man's-land and into the Liberated Areas. At the end of November 1947, they reached Ten Mile Inn, one of a cluster of villages which formed the capital of the Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan Border Region.

Approaching Ten Mile Inn from Wu An County-town twenty miles to the east, the dirt road winds along beside the boulder-strewn bed of a river, dry nine months of the year. The valley narrows and the hills rise steeply, their lower slopes laboriously terraced, their tops bare and eroded - "bald as a monk's pate". Near the village both road and river swing to the south; at this point the expanse of stones is a quarter of a mile wide, and much once-fertile valley bottom land has been lost through the floods of former years.

From a distance there appear to be two villages rather than one. Down in the valley, straddling the highway, is the main village, or 'the Street' as it is usually called; to the north-east, climbing up the side of the hills is 'the Fort', formerly a landlord citadel.

The entrances to all the courtyards of the fort face inwards, and the bare backs of the buildings, in which windows are few, small and high, present a formidable wall.

On the lower side the height of the walls is accentuated by the hillside, which has been carved out to make a sheer face. The Fort has two gates, now largely ornamental, but as the one close to the hills is approached only by narrow footpaths and that facing the street by a steep, S-shaped cobbled causeway, the Fort is still inaccessible to the wheeled vehicles which rumble along the highway. The architecture of the citadel speaks volumes of the past relations between landlord and peasant.

It was the end of November 1947 when we reached Ten Mile Inn. The stalks of the Indian corn still stood in the surrounding fields, but the cobs were already plucked. They lay in golden heaps on the beaten-mud threshing floors on the outskirts of the village and in between the Fort and 'the Street' some corn, too, could be seen drying in the autumn sun on the flat roofs of grey cement which alternated with the more elegant but less useful ones made of curved tiles.

Our mule-cart jolted through the picturesque south gate of the Street, which, being unjoined by any wall, was decorative rather than protective; for the Street, unlike the Fort, was historically the home of the people who had little wealth worth protecting. Above the graceful

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arch, in bold white letters, was inscribed a line from an old folk tune set to new words: 'Mao Ze-dong is the great star of salvation of the Chinese people'.

Such was the writers' introduction to Ten Mile Inn in November 1947.

Once installed in the village we were asked to submit a written plan of what we wished to do in the Liberated Areas. Our plan consisted of an outline for a detailed study of land reform in one village.

Meanwhile we were invited to stay at the Border Region Guest House in Ten Mile Inn. This in itself was closer to the realization of our aims than it may sound, for the 'Guest House' consisted of a number of rooms scattered in villagers' homes. We slept in one home, ate in another and visited Border Region personnel in still others. This, together with having a free run of the village, permitted a fair amount of informal observation. In a short time we were granted permission to go a step further and to carry out a preliminary investigation of the village while waiting for the official decision on the plan we had submitted.

Gathering material on Ten Mile Inn for eight months before, during and after the land reform work team's arrival there, meant total immersion in village life. For Isabel and me Ten Mile Inn became the world - our real world, not the idealised Liberated Area world of my earlier imaginings. Crossing the line from Guomindang China first into no-man's-land then into the Liberated Areas I naively thought that once in the utopia of my dreams even the fields would look more pleasing. They did not. And passing through the villages, first in the jeep, then in the mule cart, I never dreamt of the complexity of life in those huddles of flat-roofed, wattle-and-daub houses, or those of brick and grey stone, topped by tiles. I thought that if life there was not idiotic at least it was simple. I was soon to find out that it was I that was simple. To recount the whole process of my enlightenment would call for condensing our three books. I will just touch on some of the lessons I learnt.

First I learnt something of the meaning of poverty, such poverty as in my ignorance I had not expected in the Liberated Areas.

A short, teen-aged boy invited himself into our room, attracted by the clatter of the type-writer. He did not knock at the door and wait to be asked in, the concept of personal privacy being alien to Chinese feudal tradition. He listened in wonder to the clack of the typewriter and looked at the series of pictures on our wall, telling the story of the "White Haired Girl". "Ha, I know all these people: that's Comrade Yang Bai-lao" (an old poor peasant) "and that's the 8th Route Army comrade" (fiancé of the heroine) "and that's Comrade landlord". We corrected this class-collaborationism, then noticing the coal-black finger with which had been pointing at the

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pictures, I asked why he didn't wash his grimy hands. He looked at me in surprise. Didn't I know how scarce water was, and how it all had to be hauled up from the well and then carried in five-gallon petrol tins, swinging at each end of a shoulder-pole? Besides, if you washed your hands in winter (it was December) they got chapped. "But you could rub something on them," I said. I was proud of myself for not suggesting vanishing cream but something I thought would be within his budget: "A bit of pork fat." He looked at me in a way to suggest that if there was idiocy in the villages it didn't come from the villagers. "We save that, if we've got any, to eat in the jiaozi" (a kind of bloated ravioli) "at the Spring Festival." This was the one time of the year when the peasants ate meat - not steaks but snippets chopped up with cabbage, as filling for the jiaozi. Meat, if it could be afforded at all, was to give strength for spring ploughing. During the slack, cold winter months before then the peasants saved their strength and quelled their hunger by sleeping long hours, like hibernating animals.

Another product of poverty I did not at first understand was the sparsity and smallness of furniture in peasant homes. Why such tiny stools, about four inches high, I wondered, instead of more comfortable chair. It was patiently explained to me: it takes less wood to make a small stool, and wood is scarce and dear. I was 37 years old and a college graduate who had studied a bit of economics, but I had given little thought to such matters. The rooms of peasant houses were dark and the windowpanes were not of glass but coarse "grass" paper, slightly finer than that we used for toilet paper. At night light came from oil "lamps", not with tall glass funnels - such were for landlords in the old days and now for foreign guests like ourselves. The peasants used a saucer of cotton-seed oil with a pith wick sticking out over the edge, which had to be edged up every now and then. We ourselves used these, too, at times, but extravagantly burning two of the vegetable wicks instead of one.

At night the peasants slept on kangs, hollow platforms built of brick, with a network of flues inside and an outlet beneath the little fire of sorghum stalks on which water was boiled and food cooked. In the yard was the toilet, a five foot deep hole into which a pottery vat was set, such as Ali Baba might have hidden in. The pile of human manure deposited in it gradually rose higher and higher until at times it almost touched the backside when one squatted over it, for it would be emptied and carried to the fields and spread as fertiliser only as farming

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required.

Under living conditions such as these, "bowed by the weight of centuries...and on his back the burden of the world..." lived and laboured the now liberated peasant. I saw a boy of ten or twelve swinging along with two tins of water he had hauled up from the well. "Let me have a try," I said. I could hardly stand up under the weight of the load. Another time the old widow in whose house we had the use of a room, asked me to do her a favour. She had a long, narrow sack of millet like the bolsters on my old grandma's beds. Would I carry it for her up the narrow cobbled lane to the mill? Of course, I said confidently. I stooped to shoulder the load and struggled to hoist it onto my shoulder and stand up straight. Millet grains are the size of pinheads and they pack tight. The load was crushing. Though I was in the prime of life, I could only stagger to the mill. Now, nearly 40 years later, three farmers from Ten Mile Inn have just been to visit us, bearing gifts, including a sack of millet, which they toted easily into our kitchen. I recalled the widow's sack and another incident from those days. Wang Wen-sheng, who following the land reform adjustment campaign we witnessed, was elected to the new village government. For a sack of millet he had been sold by his father during a famine.

The village women had a harder lot than the men, for they worked on the land, even though many of them had "liberated feet", freed from childhood binding only when democratic reforms were introduced. (Older women still had tiny, "lily" feet, bound too long to be "liberated". On top of farm work they did household chores, cooking and washing and minding the children, of whom they bore many, hoping for sons to support them in their old age. Some women bore ten of whom only one might survive because of the primitive hygiene and sanitation.

As Mao Ze-dong wrote in the twenties, the women were doubly oppressed. They were still struggling for equality. Before "the sun rose in the West", that is, when communist guerrillas came out of the Taihang mountains and drove away the landlords, the Guomindang and the Japanese invaders - before then the women did not rate as human beings. One woman told us, "Some man would come to the door asking to see the head of the household - a man, of course. 'Anybody home?' he would shout. If the man was out, the woman inside would answer. 'No, nobody at home.' We women weren't counted as people before the communists came. Our

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husbands could take off their shoes and beat us with them and nobody thought anything of it. That was it was like before the Party got us to form our Women's Association to stand up for us."

Yet against this background of backwardness and poverty and toil and oppression the peasants maintained an impressive dignity and self-respect, a sense of humour, an eloquence full of vivid imagery, and an ingenuity with which I could not compete. After the eight weeks land reform adjustment campaign, every field had to be measured so as to ensure equitable distribution. The measuring was done with a wooden implement called a bow. It was like a gigantic pair of dividers with a span of several feet. The land measurers, mostly peasants who at some time had worked as shop assistants and could use the abacus, would walk the "bow" along the edges of each field. Then they would click the beads of the abacus and work out the area of the field. I was not much good at maths at school after being in the class of the chalk chucking teacher at Cheltenham, but I could do multiplication. So as I went round with the land-measurers I took out my pencil and pad and made my calculations. When the field was square or rectangular I could just about keep up with the peasants. But when it was of irregular shape, with a bit jutting out here and there or when it had a grave mound in the middle, I was in trouble. Not the peasants. Somehow they coped with the angles and circumferences to the owner's and the onlookers' satisfaction, though to them the slightest error was a matter of moment and they watched bow and measurers as if their lives depended on it. I simply could not compete in this applied geometry and soon put my pad and my pride in my pocket. So much for my higher education.

The peasants' lively language was not all original. Some of their phrases which struck me as vivid were mere clichés, old sayings or proverbs; some were doubtless borrowed from Mao Ze-dong. But to me they were new and eloquent and I urged our interpreter not to search for idiomatic English equivalents but to render them literally in the words the peasants spoke. When four peasants clubbed together to own a donkey, they each had "one leg of an ass". Those for whom such possessions were beyond the dreams of avarice did "not own one hair of a donkey". Landlords and rich peasants were "Old Moneybags". Fast women with waved hair had "aeroplane heads". Those who in times of famine slept with men for money were called "worn-out shoes", a synonym for prostitutes. Property seized from landlords and rich peasants during earlier land reform campaigns was called

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"struggle fruit". Relatives who hid property for the owners to prevent it from being seized were "air-raid shelters". Fertile and infertile land was "fat land and thin". Taking land from those with too much land and giving to those with too little was "filling the holes and levelling the tops". Of a person easily influenced by bad company it was said "whichever way the hill slopes, he falls".

And within the limits of their poverty the peasants were generous and hospitable. When we dropped in for a chat we would courteously be offered a seat on a tiny stool or on the kang and served a bowl of hot water, precious because it had been carried from the well and boiled on the kang stove. My father used to talk to me of "all the tea in China". The peasants of Ten Mile Inn never drank a drop of it.

I do not mean to swing from denying the backwardness to extolling the grandeur of rural life. I am, after all, a townie born and bred and I often feel that my love of the countryside is just surface deep love of the land which has never been watered by the sweat of my brow. But our eight months in Ten Mile Inn and shorter spells in other Chinese villages force me to deny the "idiocy" (which I suspect is not a true translation of the German of Marx and Engels). And our writing of three books on Ten Mile Inn has deepened my respect for the man and the woman with the hoe. And our months in Ten Mile Inn prepared me for the tests of my next 40 years in China, even though they were spent mainly in cities.

Looking now at the photos I took crossing the fields, climbing the hills and walking in the village alleyways, my mind flashes back over the decades. I see the terraces laboriously hewn from the slopes. I see the primitive ploughs and seeders and harrows of wood and the stone rollers pulled by donkeys and mules, guided by undersized men whose strength lay in their endurance and whose skills had changed little over the ages. I am back in the temple courtyard where the work team leader proclaimed the new Land Law at a meeting of the whole village, the men puffing at thimble-bowl pipes and the women spinning or stitching the soles of cloth shoes. I see the faces of shrewd village leaders, now dead and of women called old at 40, worn out with work and child bearing. I see once well-off peasants wearing humiliating patches of cloth on their backs inscribed with the words "Struggle Object", and the wealth of the landlords and rich peasants, piled up in the temple courtyard or strung on lines, then carried home to the poor, the widows and orphans to whom they were distributed at the end of the

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"land reform adjustment" campaign. I see the journalists of the People's Daily who formed the land reform work team and who after the setting up of the People's Republic in 1949 became editors, officials, municipal Party Secretaries. Before then they (and to a lesser extent Isabel and I) led simple lives, eating millet and sweet potatoes, wearing suits of homespun cloth, living in peasant homes, sleeping on kangs. Those are some of my pictures of the land reform, which soon spread across China in a movement which changed history. Some of the pictures are not in our books but I can see them in my mind's eye.

One day we walked across the fields and round the hills to Yetao, the small town which served as the headquarters of Bo Yi-bo, the Border region representative of the central committee of the Chinese C.P. On the little town's outskirts an enormous marquee made of reed mats had been set up, large enough to hold thousands of cadres from all over the region. Cotton-uniformed figures converged on it from all directions and I became involved with some in a discussion of the merits of industrialization and mechanization. "It all depends on who controls the machines," I pontificated. Once inside the hall Isabel and I were given seats of honour on the stage. Bo Yi-bo advanced to the front of the platform and spoke - for four hours. It was a structured oration, with headings and sub-headings set out like a mathematical theorem. He had a sheaf of notes in his hand but never looked at them. At one point the speaker turned towards Isabel and me, with polite words of welcome, and with an ironical smile mentioned that the Chinese Communists had more than once received advice from foreign friends. We had no such pretensions and Bo made clear that, fortunately, the foreign comrades' advice was not always followed. Halfway through the speech there was a buzz of excitement, people stood up, craned their necks and clapped. A short stocky figure strode down the aisle. That was my first glimpse of Deng Xiao-ping, then political Commissar of the Liberation Army's 129th Division, which was pushing victoriously to the south.

A few weeks later we rode on horses carefully chosen for their docility (though to the alarm of our escort I did manage to urge mine into a canter). Our destination was the village of West Garrison, which merited its name, with a massive gate and crenelated wall. There we were received by the head of the New China News Agency, Liao Cheng-zhi. At 45 Liao was the "baby" of the Central Committee and was nicknamed "Tubby". In

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later years he was slated to become President of the Chinese People's Republic but death intervened. In 1948 Liao evidently wanted find out whether I might work at the News Agency. By the time an offer was made I was so immersed in our book writing project that I was reluctant to accept. Eventually the job went to Alan Winnington, an experienced journalist of the British Daily Worker and I spent the next 30 or 40 years as a teacher.

Contacts with such notables as Bo Yi-bo and Liao Cheng-zhi were rare. For the most part we mingled with the peasants and the land reform work team until leaving Ten Mile Inn in June, 1948.

We ended our momentous months in the village by walking five miles in the rain to the station of the narrow gauge railway some miles down the valley. I insisted on carrying on my shoulder a cumbersome reed mat rolled into a five foot cylinder which belonged to the Ten Mile Inn reception centre. Village life had taught me a lesson in thrift and regard for public property which was to stay with me for decades. The Toonerville train took us to Wu An county town. After a brief stay in town we loaded our belongings onto a mule cart and started our journey of a hundred and fifty odd miles to Shijiazhuang, then with a population of 200,000 the largest liberated city south of the Great Wall. Our rural life, we thought, was at an end.

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Notes

1. These are:

1) Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn,
Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959;

2) The First Years of Yangyi Commune, Routledge & Kegan
Paul, London, 1966;

3) Mass Movement in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn,
Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, and Random House, New
York, 1979.